



Diego Ignacio Bugada Bernal\*

## VIRTUAL, THE NEW IN-PERSON CULTURAL INDUSTRY LEADERS DISCUSS THE "NEW NORMAL"

**A**s we have seen throughout this issue of *Voices of Mexico*, the COVID-19 pandemic, more than accelerating or driving change, or perhaps triggering a paralysis of human endeavor or at least stimulating it, has tested the resilience of governments, populations, groups, and individuals, and with them, different spheres of human activity. Among all of these, its impact has been especially significant in cultural activities.

Every transformation begins with chaos. This paradigm of history can also be valid for the vast world of culture, in its proper sense of transformative action. How are we to solve this intractable problem? How should we adapt to times of confinement, uncertainty, and fear? How can we take advantage of trends in the multiple and accelerated changes we are experiencing and that were already perceptible before the crisis—in technology, in habits of acquisition and consumption, and in the virtualization of interpersonal communication, among many other areas— even before we can understand and assimilate them? How, in short, can we manage not only to survive but to transcend as a cultural discipline or industry?

We put several similar questions, albeit focused more on specific fields (book fairs, film criticism, film festivals, and art curatorship and museography) to four of the most distinguished representatives of these four areas: Marisol Schultz Manaut, director general of the Guadalajara International Book Fair; film critic and historian Leonardo García Tsao; the director of the Morelia International Film Festival, Daniela Michel; and curator and art historian Karen Cordero Reiman. If we are to identify a concurrent vision among them all, it is their belief in the capacity for creative regeneration of the industries they represent, which have successfully emerged from various other crises in the past. Nevertheless, they remain acutely aware of how much not being able to experience and relive emotions takes away from the cultural experience: for example, browsing multiple aisles replete with editorial offerings, enjoying cinema on the big screen, or recreating the sensations that come with physical and sensorial proximity to great works of pictorial or sculptural art. In effect, the virtual experience is not the same, but we should not disdain it, much less succumb to nostalgia for what, to some extent, may not return to how it was before for years. Instead, we should explore and make the most of the many unquestionable virtues and features that derive from our equally irresistible technological progress. Change and the need to keep pace with the virtual dimension of our existence were not born of this pandemic, nor will they disappear with it. Throughout history, humanity has had to adapt to many transformations of different forms and varying intensity, and cultural and artistic creativity and the combined impetus of promoters, creators, critics, and spectators has been one of the prime forces driving us to constantly improve on what has come before.

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Photos courtesy of the Guadalajara International Book Fair (FIL), the Morelia International Film Festival (FICM), and the University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC).



Inauguration of the 34th Guadalajara International Book Fair, November 28, 2020.

**MARISOL SCHULTZ MANAUT**, *director general*  
*Of the Guadalajara International Book Fair*

**Voices of Mexico (vm):** How has the idea of how to hold the book fair changed since the pandemic began?

**Marisol Schultz (ms):** Together with the uncertainty, the devastation, the hundreds of thousands of deaths and people affected, and a radical change in living conditions that the coronavirus has so unexpectedly and in such an unprecedented way brought to this beleaguered 2020, activities in many sectors have had to stop, slow down, or change in most of the world. This has had a social and economic impact that is as difficult to predict as to stop and is the case of many mass events such as book fairs. The Guadalajara International Book Fair (FIL Guadalajara) is no exception, and although in the first quarter of the year we saw many other international fairs cancelled or migrate to an online version, we held on to the idea of being able to hold an in-person fair, with all the sanitary protocols set by the authorities in place. We worked on three scenarios for practically the entire year: one was a hybrid fair (with both remote and in-person activities); another, an in-person fair; and the third, an online fair. The evolution of the pandemic worldwide pushed us finally to make the decision that the entire program would be held on line.



The 2020 Guadalajara International Book Fair was able to go ahead on line.

**VM:** What proposals has the FIL made to hold the fair in the conditions we are experiencing in the pandemic?

**MS:** Holding the fair on line has posed many complications, ranging from logistics to technologies and budgets. The fair's organizing team has worked harder than ever this year, since, at the end of the day, we had no previous experience with a virtual fair. So, this is an uncharted path, along which we've had to learn new dynamics, new formats, and new forms of communication.

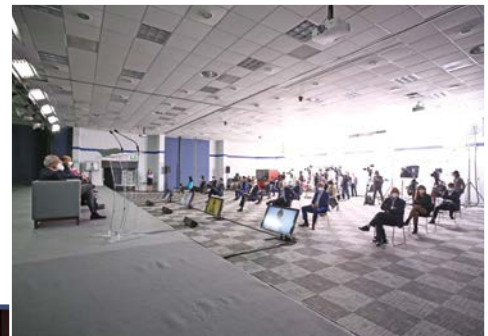
**VM:** Will book e-commerce change because of COVID-19?

**MS:** Yes, just as the outlook for books in general will change. In today's by-no-means promising circumstances, one particularly vulnerable sector is the book industry. Since the middle of March, when bookstores and many other points of sale closed in most of the world, publishing houses began to see a loss in sales that they have still not been able to get over. Unfortunately, many of the smaller houses will not survive or will only do so with an infinite number of difficulties.

**VM:** What has happened to book fairs this year?

**MS:** As I said, book fairs and literary festivals of all kinds the world over have either had to close down or move into the virtual world. This makes the crisis even bigger because, even though we have powerful platforms and good content, the magic of wandering through aisles crammed with possibilities for reading and with multiple options in all the publishing genres is irreplaceable. And this has an impact on book sales. All the links in the so-called book chain have had to change their *modus operandi*.

"Even though we have powerful platforms and good content, the magic of wandering through aisles crammed with possibilities for reading and with multiple options in all the publishing genres is irreplaceable." MS



Performance of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Santander Performing Arts Group, 2020 Guadalajara International Book Fair.

**LEONARDO GARCIA TSAO**, *historian and film critic*

**Voices of Mexico (vm):** A trend in the film industry, already apparent even before the pandemic, is the growth of streaming, not only as a means of marketing films but also as a central player in film production, as in the case of Netflix. Do you think that, in the present situation, this dynamic could accelerate to the point of threatening the viability of movie theaters or at least a part of their market share?

**Leonardo Garcia Tsao (LGT):** Yes, well, the danger was present even before the pandemic; in other words, digital platforms had already created a kind of uncomfortable rivalry within the film industry. This developed because, clearly, their presence in the homes of thousands and thousands of people gave them a tremendous advantage over the idea of going to a movie theater and buying one, two, or more tickets, and so forth. So, just to mention the most popular, Netflix's incursion in film production has been controversial, even in some film festivals; I remember, for example, two years ago, *Roma*, by

Alfonso Cuarón, had plans to compete at Cannes, and due to its ties to Netflix it was blocked because, even though the festival's organizers had previously programmed films produced by Netflix, the French film distributors and exhibitors organized a kind of boycott, threatening to withdraw their entries for Cannes if Netflix films were screened, on the grounds that it would be harmful to their business. As a result, Cannes was one of the few major festivals not to show Netflix films; but from that point on a rivalry was formed, although *Roma* was subsequently entered in the Venice Film Festival with no objections and won its first major prize there.

A second remark: on the idea that cinema can compete with streaming platforms, under the current circumstances of second and third waves of the pandemic, I think not. People still prefer to stay home and avoid the risk of contagion, or at least that's how I see it. Being in a high-risk group, I have not gone to a movie theater because I don't feel safe indoors, since you never know what can happen. So yes, I do think movies in theaters are losing ground to digital platforms.



Simone Daino / Unsplash

Digital platforms, an alternative to movie houses.

"Digital platforms have cemented their dominance. The proof is that directors like Martin Scorsese, who may be today's most prestigious director, has worked with Netflix. Most people wait for new films to premiere on Netflix because it's convenient." LGT



Cuartoscuro.com

*Roma*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón and produced by Netflix, won 10 statuettes at the 61st Ariel Awards show for the best of Mexican cinema.

**VM:** How have measures to control COVID-19 affected large-scale productions, especially those involving large numbers of people, like stunt doubles, crowd scenes, etc.?

**LGT:** You don't even need to go that far, any movie set is in danger because a film crew, however small, has 12 to 15 people, whose interaction inevitably carries a certain risk, which is why film production is at a standstill. Productions have resumed in developed countries, but in Mexico, as far as I know, none of them has resumed filming. The industry has been severely affected. For example, on the latest *Batman* movie, the star, Robert Pattinson, tested positive, and as a result they had to put production on hold while he was in quarantine. Imagine the cost in terms of production, millions of dollars a day; imagine the losses shutting down a large crew can cause. A similar situation occurred on the new *Mission Impossible* film with Tom Cruise. They started filming at the start of the pandemic and had to shut down for a long time. It has been extremely hard, but for the entire entertainment industry: concerts, theater, everything is paralyzed.

**VM:** Do you think the situation, as it applies to the entire entertainment industry, is the start of a transformation that will make way for new forms of production and consumption of entertainment? Do you see us moving toward a particular future scenario?

**LGT:** I think people are waiting for the COVID-19 issue to be resolved, for vaccines to finally be applied. There are signs that

we'll have enough highly effective vaccines very soon, so there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Of course, it remains to be seen how they'll be administered and other details, but people have more confidence in a solution than in coping with the pandemic.

**VM:** What have been the main changes in the art of filmmaking in recent years and where is it headed? What would its new normal be like?

**LGT:** Well, I think digital platforms have cemented their dominance. The proof is that directors like Martin Scorsese, who may be today's most prestigious director, has worked with Netflix; his film *The Irishman* had a short run in theaters and since then has been permanently on streaming. Most people wait for new films to premiere on Netflix because it's convenient. That's what's happening with *Mank*, by David Fincher, which opened in some theaters in Mexico and will be on Netflix in a few days. I prefer to wait.

**VM:** Are you pessimistic?

**LGT:** I think the film industry will recover, without a doubt, but Mexican film worries me, not because of the pandemic, but because of our government. They have eliminated all the trusts that funded film production; they have deprived the Mexican film industry of millions of pesos needed to produce films, and they did it when the local industry was on a roll, producing some 200 films a year, which, industry-wide, was very robust.

**DANIELA MICHEL**, director general of the Morelia International Film Festival (FICM)

**Voices of Mexico (vm):** How did the pandemic change the Morelia International Film Festival (FICM)?

**Daniela Michel (DM):** From the start of the health crisis we started organizing online screenings through our platform “FICM Presenta en Línea” (FICM Presents On Line). We wanted to offer a free, open space where the general public could see top-quality Mexican films, mostly winners from previous editions of the festival. The platform offered a curated selection of 26 feature films and 106 shorts between April and August 2020, registering 3 441 370 visits.

With this experience in mind, and given the uncertainty of the situation, we decided to plan a hybrid festival, with in-person screenings in theaters operated by the Cinépolis chain in Morelia, and parallel to that, with a significant online presence accessible through the Cinépolis Klic platform and on public television on Channel 22. The festival’s digital presence included all the Mexican entries, an important selection of films from Cannes, including the selection from its Critics’ Week, and the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum, international premieres, screenings of classic Mexican films, and special showings. Also, we prepared interviews, round-table discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, hosted on Cinépolis Klic.



18th Morelia International Film Festival (FICM), 2020.



An online interview with Matt Dillon about his documentary *The Great Fellove*, at the 2020 Morelia International Film Festival (FICM).



The premiere of the remastered digital version of Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Love Is a Bitch* at the 2020 FICM.

**VM:** What is the balance sheet of this latest edition, compared with previous years?

**DM:** This year the festival focused on the Mexican competition, which has always been the heart of our programming. We take pride in being the only festival in which the official selection in the competition is exclusively Mexican. In this edition, where the prizes were awarded by an international jury working on line, we had 89 titles in competition, practically the same number as last year.

**VM:** What areas of opportunity does the “new normal” create for the FICM and for festivals in general? Do you see them shifting toward a hybrid, virtual and in-person, model?

**DM:** This “new normal” has created a terrific opportunity to evolve toward a more digital world and cultivate new audiences. It bears mentioning that, since 2014, the festival has offered the “Online Selection of Mexican Short Films,” a virtual space through which our audiences can watch some of the short films included in the official selection free of charge and vote for their favorites. We advanced this initiative because we understand the importance digital platforms have gained in the public’s relationship with cinema. Movie theaters are the natural environment for watching films, but digital platforms expand the possibilities for reaching new audiences. Over the five days of the last festival, our digital section reached nearly a million viewers through online plat-

**“Movie theaters are the natural environment for watching films, but digital platforms expand the possibilities for reaching new audiences.” DM**

forms and public television, giving cinephiles nationwide the opportunity to see the finest Mexican films.

**VM:** Streaming, not only as a marketing tool, but as a source of sponsorship for film production, as in the case of Netflix, increasingly rivals the major production companies and film distributors and theater chains, and not just today: this has been gaining ground for several years now. Do you think under the present circumstances this dynamic could accelerate even more, and affect the film business to the point where it could even threaten the viability of movie theaters or produce a definitive transformation of this cultural industry?

**DM:** Digital platforms play a central role in the world of cultural dissemination. It’s extraordinary to see how international and local festivals have been able to adapt very quickly to continue providing crucial support for the film community. However, there’s nothing like the experience of going to a movie theater; nothing compares with it. In-person festivals will continue to provide vital meeting points for filmmakers, the public, and the film community.

**KAREN CORDERO REIMAN**, *curator and art historian*

**Voices of Mexico (vm):** Before 2020, people were already talking about museums receiving fewer visitors worldwide. Has the pandemic been an opportunity to reverse that trend even though attendance is virtual? Why?

**Karen Cordero Reiman (KCR):** I don't have statistics on museum attendance before and during the pandemic, but I think that it has forced museums to rethink their communication strategies from the point of view of virtual activities, exhibitions, and activations of their collections, in order to maintain an active presence with their public. The use of online platforms facilitates the participation of a broader international and national public, since it eliminates both the need for travel and admission costs; it also allows for the participation of people who perhaps wouldn't have been able to be part of a dialogue that required physical presence. This has opened up opportunities for creating broader and more diverse dialogues that museums would do well to keep in mind, even after the pandemic.

**vm:** The avant-gardes of the last century wanted to take art into the streets, take the artistic experience to other spaces. What are the scope and implications of putting art on screens today? What does receiving museum content in this new way mean?

**KCR:** The perception of art online, through computers, tablets, and telephones, while it broadens the potential public, radically

reduces the public's access to the multisensorial and material qualities of the visual and performing arts, as well as possibilities for corporeal interaction. The implications of this process vary, depending both on the medium and characteristics of the artwork and on those of the digital device used to receive it. At the same time, the possibility of creating artworks designed for digital reception has opened up new frontiers and poses new challenges for creators.

**vm:** Besides facilitating access, how could technology be used to establish a link between museums and the public? Do you think that augmented reality, immersion technologies, and interaction with art will strengthen the museum experience?

**KCR:** In my understanding, technology enriches the museum experience primarily when the conceptual and material use of these elements by artists (or museum educators) incorporates a critical vision of technology and its implications, as is the case, for example, in the work of Rafael Lozano Hemmer, or is part of the original conception of the piece. Technological elements can also be useful as an auxiliary element in museum education and provide access to additional information and examples, which complements the experience of the artwork, but are clearly differentiated from the aesthetic experience in itself. In many other cases technological elements become "gimmicks," which are attractive because of their novelty, but tend to displace the artistic experience on which the works are posited.



Photo by Oliver Santana, courtesy of the MUA.C.

Mónica Mayer, *The Clothesline*, participatory installation first exhibited in 1978.



“The possibility of creating artworks designed for digital reception has opened up new frontiers and poses new challenges for creators.” KCR



Screenshot from the online Museum of Mexican Women Artists (MUMA).

**VM:** Personally, as a curator, what does this new digital experience mean to you? How are you experiencing the change? What thrills you and what will you miss?

**KCR:** One of the ways digital elements have been present in exhibitions I have curated is as an additional interface in participatory works, such as *The Clothesline* and *No to Abducted Motherhoods*, by the feminist artist Mónica Mayer. In both these cases, the use of computers and online platforms offered an opportunity to gather information from additional sources, and in the latter case, it also allowed for the documentation of participations in activating the piece in the museum context. In both cases, these elements functioned well because they were conceived by the artist as an integral part of the works and their dialogical character.

I've also been part of the advisory council of the online MUMA: Museum of Mexican Women Artists since its inception in 2008 and have curated several exhibitions for its online platform and adapted other physical exhibitions for presentation in this format. This museum is conceived as a vehicle for making visible, documenting, and interpreting the work of women artists in the light of their extremely unequal presence in exhibitions and collections in Mexico (and in general around the world).

In both these cases, the use of digital elements is conceived in relation to broader objectives rather than as an objective in itself. In other words, it has a practical function as part of my curatorial work, but I don't think I have used digital resources in particularly innovative ways, perhaps also because I'm not part of a generation that grew up dealing with those interfaces.

Digital resources have been useful to me to facilitate processes of documentation and in working with designers who are able to create simulations of exhibition spaces that allow us to plan physical solutions in advance.

In general, I'm grateful for these ways in which digital resources have made communication and documentation processes more efficient for exhibition planning teams.

However, my work as an art historian and curator focuses in large part on the body and the senses as essential elements of aesthetic and social experience, and while some digital works deal with these aspects in creative and powerful ways (for example, works by Tania Candiani and Gerardo Suter), I find that the contrasts posed by the rich variety of techniques, materials, and conceptual tools that form the fabric of art history allow art to appeal to memory and the body in ways that are precluded by the limitation of art to digital elements and supports. **VM**